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Biden Releases Record NNSA Nuclear Weapons Budget

Santa Fe, NM – President Biden has released his proposed FY 2024 budget for the Department of Energy’s semi-autonomous nuclear weapons agency, the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA). The budget for NNSA’s “Total Weapons Activities” for nuclear weapons research and production programs is slated to increase by 10% to \$18.8 billion.

Of that \$18.8 billion requested for FY 2024, over \$3 billion is devoted to “Life Extension Programs” or “Alterations” that extend the service lives of existing nuclear weapons by decades while giving them new military capabilities. It also includes two new-design nuclear weapons, the W87-1 ICBM warhead (increased 50% to \$1 billion) and the sub-launched W93 warhead (increased 62% to \$390 million). Meanwhile, funding for dismantlements that provide a good nonproliferation example and save taxpayers’ money by eliminating long-term security costs is decreased by 4% to \$53.7 million. That is a small fraction of one percent of NNSA’s Total Weapons Activities.

Two bright spots, yet still small relative to the U.S.’ planned \$2 trillion nuclear weapons “modernization” program, are the zeroing out of funding for the Sea-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM) warhead and stronger language on the retirement of the 1.2 megaton B83 bomb. Trump proposed to bring back nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missiles, which were retired by President George H. Bush after the end of the Cold War. Biden’s 2022 Nuclear Posture Review canceled the SLCM, but Congress insisted on funding it, which will only grow stronger with Republican control the House.

A major element in the NNSA budget request is “Plutonium Modernization,” which in reality is the expanded production of plutonium “pit” bomb cores. Pit production has been the chokepoint of resumed U.S. industrial-scale production of nuclear weapons ever since a 1989 FBI raid investigating environmental crimes closed the Rocky Flats Plant near Denver. The Pentagon has called expanded pit production the #1 modernization issue. The Biden Administration proposes to fund it at \$2.77 billion, down 4.4% from the enacted appropriation in FY 2023. However, that was after NNSA asked Congress to add \$500 million in FY 2023 for pit production at the Savannah River Site. In all, FY 2024 funding for pit production at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) is requested at \$1.76 billion (up 14%). FY 2024 funding for pit production at the Savannah River Site (SRS) is proposed at \$921 million, down 27% from what Congress enacted in FY 2023.

DOE’s nuclear weapons and environmental management programs have been on the independent Government Accountability Office’s “High Risk List” for project mismanagement and waste of taxpayers’ dollars since 1991. Estimated costs for the pit production facility at SRS have already

more than doubled to \$11 billion, with startup delayed from 2030 to 2036. Likewise, estimated costs for the “Los Alamos Pit Production Project” have increased from \$3.9 billion in FY 2023 to \$4.7 billion in FY 2024, up 20% in one year. (NNSA FY 2024 budget request, PDF page 213)

A new “Plutonium Production Building” at LANL is planned as new start construction, estimated at under \$50 million for ~66,000 square feet of office space. In October 2017 DOE exempted non-nuclear, non-complex line-item construction projects that cost less than \$50 million from its own Order 413.3B, whose purpose is to provide program and project management direction. (PDF page 556). Growing use of so-called “minor construction” (i.e., under \$50 million) that evade needed congressional scrutiny is a growing pattern in NNSA budget requests. Outside of this budget request, LANL plans on four other future “minor construction” projects related to expanded plutonium pit production.

As another example of never-ending NNSA cost overruns, estimated final costs for the Uranium Processing Facility (UPF) at the Y-12 Plant near Oak Ridge, TN are now \$8.5-8.95 billion. (PDF page 298.) NNSA swore to Congress time and again that UPF costs would never exceed \$6.5 billion, and even that was after the UPF’s mission was radically downscoped.

A January 2023 Government Accountability Office report concluded that NNSA has no credible cost estimates for its expanded plutonium pit production program, which is the agency’s most expensive program ever. An earlier GAO report formally recommended that NNSA institute an “Integrated Master Schedule” to better plan and coordinate planned redundant pit production between LANL and SRS. But Biden’s budget request has no indication that NNSA will implement these common-sense good government measures.

Moreover, no future pit production is scheduled to maintain the safety and reliability of the existing, extensively tested nuclear weapons stockpile. Instead it will be for pits that deviate from original tested designs. This may actually degrade national security since newly manufactured pits cannot be full-scale tested because of the international testing moratorium. Alternatively, it could increase pressure for the U.S. to resume nuclear weapons testing, which would have severe international proliferation consequences. This is especially ironic when the U.S. already has more than 15,000 pits in storage and independent experts have found that pits remain reliable for at least a century.

NNSA’s FY 2024 budget request itself notes that “The stockpile is inherently moving away from the nuclear explosive test database through aggregate influences of aging, modern manufacturing techniques, modern materials, *and evolving design philosophies.*” (PDF page 392, italicized emphasis added.) New nuclear weapons designs are elective and introduce uncertainties into the tested stockpile. Nuclear Watch New Mexico argues for a conservative, prudent program of maintaining the existing stockpile while at the same time the U.S. demonstrates leadership toward the multilateral, verifiable global nuclear disarmament it pledged to long ago in the 1970 NonProliferation Treaty.

In contrast to the 10% increase for NNSA’s nuclear weapons research and production programs, nonproliferation programs to reduce the nuclear threat are held flat at \$2.5 billion. This is the wrong direction as the world enters a new nuclear arms race, arguably more dangerous than the first given multiple nuclear actors and the advent of cyber and hypersonic weapons and artificial

intelligence. Putin’s nuclear saber rattling over his war in Ukraine makes this all too real. More or “better” U.S. nuclear weapons only help to accelerate the new nuclear arm race, when ex-Defense Secretary Robert McNamara observed that we survived the first one only by luck.

Jay Coghlan, Director of Nuclear Watch New Mexico, commented, “The U.S.’ existing nuclear weapons stockpile has been extensively tested and proven to be reliable. There are already enough nuclear weapons to destroy civilization many times over. When will emerging national security concerns such as disruptive climate change and preventing the next global pandemic be prioritized above more unneeded nuclear weapons?”

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The National Nuclear Security Administration’s FY 2024 Congressional Budget Request is available at <https://www.energy.gov/sites/default/files/2023-03/doi-fy-2024-budget-vol-1-nnsa.pdf>

This press release is available at <https://nukewatch.org/press-release-item/nnsa-fy-2024-budget/>